How can we know when it is best to forgive or confront?
Scripture: Matthew 18
Code: QA154

That's a good question because most people seem to err on one side or the other. Some people think it is best to overlook every offense and take pride in their tolerance. However, Paul confronted the Corinthians for tolerating sin in the church and rebuked them for failing to deal with a man living in sin (1 Cor. 5).

On the other side of the issue are people who confront over any slight infraction and make themselves intolerable. Are there any biblical principles to help us make the right choice? Yes! Here are six guidelines to help you know whether to forgive or confront.

Whenever possible, especially if the offense is petty or unintentional, it is best to forgive unilaterally. This is the very essence of a gracious spirit. It is the Christlike attitude called for in Ephesians 4:1-3. We are called to maintain a gracious tolerance ("forbearance") of others' faults. Believers should have a sort of mutual immunity to petty offenses. Love "is not easily angered" (1 Cor. 13:5, NIV). If every fault required formal confrontation, the whole of our church life would be spent confronting and resolving conflicts over petty annoyances. So for the sake of peace, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we are to show tolerance whenever possible (see 1 Pet. 2:21-25; Mat. 5:39-40).

If you are the only injured party, even if the offense was public and flagrant, you may choose to forgive unilaterally. Examples of this abound in Scripture. Joseph (Genesis 37-50), David (2 Sam. 16:5-8), and Stephen (Acts 7:60) each demonstrated the unilateral forgiveness of Christ (Luke 23:34).

If you observe a serious offense that is a sin against someone other than you, confront the offender. Justice never permits a Christian to cover a sin against someone else. While we are entitled, and even encouraged, to overlook wrongs committed against us, Scripture everywhere forbids us to overlook wrongs committed against another (see Ex. 23:6; Deut. 16:20; Isa. 1:17; Isa. 59:15-16; Jer. 22:3; Lam. 3:35-36).

When ignoring an offense might hurt the offender, confront the guilty party. Sometimes choosing to overlook an offense might actually injure the offender. In such cases it is our duty to confront in love (Gal. 6:1-2).

When a sin is scandalous or otherwise potentially damaging to the body of Christ, the guilty party should be confronted. Some sins have the potential to defile many people, and Scripture gives ample

warning of such dangers (see Heb. 12:15; 3:13; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). In fact, Scripture calls for the church to discipline individuals who refuse to repent of open sin in the body, so that the purity of the body might be preserved (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5).

Lastly, any time an offense results in a broken relationship, confrontation of the sinner should occur. Any offense that causes a breach in relationships simply cannot be overlooked. Both the offense and the breach must be confronted, and reconciliation must be sought. And both the offended party and the offender have a responsibility to seek reconciliation (Luke 17:3; Matt. 5:23-24). There is never any excuse for a Christian on either side of a broken relationship to refuse to pursue reconciliation.

The only instance where such a conflict should remain unresolved is if all the steps of discipline in Matthew 18 have been exhausted and the guilty party still refuses to repent.

Adapted from John's book The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness , a doctrinal treatment of the most fundamental human need.

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